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Nurturing Excellence in E-Learning Practice Through an Academic Programme (MA Online and Blended Learning)

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Abstract: This paper describes the development of the MA in Online and Blended Learning aimed at colleagues teaching and supporting learning in Higher Education Institutions. We will present information regarding the local context, strategic initiatives which led to programme creation, including an overview of the UEL e-learning strategy, and situate this within recent UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) e-learning initiatives. We present the features of the programme, needs analysis, and the sources of information which were used to inform the curriculum design and the choice of delivery model. This is related to staff development needs in the fields of e- and distance learning as identified in a recent UEL Benchmarking of E-Learning Exercise. Finally, we describe the approach to development utilised and assess this in terms of its strengths and weaknesses before presenting an evaluation of the approach taken. Further developments and opportunities are also discussed.

1. Introduction

The Master's programme in Online and Blended Learning (MAOBL) was developed as part of a strategic initiative to nurture excellence in e-learning practice in the local institutional context. There were three main drivers behind the creation of the programme. These included the findings of the 2006 Benchmarking of E-learning Exercise (Vyortkina 2007), the HEA Pathfinder project (UEL 2007) and the development of an internal Professional Standards Framework (pending accreditation with the HEA). The MA was therefore conceived as a strategic priority which would support colleagues towards making the best use of e-learning tools and methodologies to enhance student learning and to support colleagues towards gaining HEA professional recognition (HEA 2008) by operating within both the institutional and HEA Professional Standards Frameworks.

2. Institutional Context

2.1. Culture for Success / Professional Standards Framework

The MA in Online and Blended Learning (UEL 2008a) forms part of the UEL Professional Standards Framework, which in turn supports the achievement of the seven aims of the Culture for Success: Our Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2006 – 2009 (UEL 2006).

1. Place the quality of each student's learning experience at the centre of all our activities;
2. Develop, support, value and reward excellence in teaching;
3. Create and celebrate a culture of success for all students and staff;
4. Be recognised for our inclusive curricula and effective pedagogy that enables the success of our diverse learning community;
5. Enhance the relationship between teaching, research and scholarship to benefit students' learning;
6. Ensure our students have the skills necessary for success in learning, personal development, employment and the enhancement of employability; and
7. Provide home and international students with a range of study options that meet their particular learning needs.

The development of the MA programme supports these strategic aims through the design of the curriculum, the practices which are modelled in the academic support, pastoral support and administration of the programme. It also encourages and rewards research and scholarship both internally through its integration with the Professional Standards Framework and its proposed relationship to the promotions procedure and externally with professional organisations such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Staff and Educational Development Agency (SEDA).

2.2. UEL E-learning Strategy

The UEL E-learning Strategy (UEL 2008b) is geared towards embedded e-learning institutionally. It is informed by:

- HEFCE strategy for e-learning 2005-2015 and *Measures of Success* (Strand 4) through addressing skills, knowledge and competencies for e-learning in training and continuing professional development for learning and teaching staff, including learning technologists and reviewing the human capacity to deliver future e-learning growth (HEFCE 2005).
- UEL Benchmarking of E-Learning Exercise
- A Culture for Success: Our Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2006 – 2009 (UEL 2006)
- Current developments in research and practice pertaining to learning and teaching.

Our sustainable E-learning Strategy aims to support achievement of our strategic priorities through a culture shift and the re-skilling of staff, quality evaluation and enhancement of e-learning, accessing, sharing and reusing e-resources, and using the VLE and other e-learning tools to support distance learning provision and to improve the learning experiences and retention of our campus-based students.

It is recognised that effective execution of the E-learning Strategy is dependent upon being properly equipped with the tools to accomplish the aims of the strategy. Features such as the pedagogic implementation of e-learning, technological skills and awareness of e-learning opportunities are crucial to successful implementation of the strategy and accordingly are the focus of the MA in Online and Blended Learning.

The new programme is a vehicle for empowering and enabling staff to achieve their professional aspirations and facilitate the implementation of e-learning strategy by making e-learning a normal part of university policies and practices over time, complementing and enhancing traditional teaching methods to support and advance student learning.

3. Features of the Programme

3.1. The Programme Structure

The MAOBL is comprised of five modules, each of which equates to 300 hours of study and 30 academic

credits (ECTS 15) at Master's level:

1. Applications of Learning Technologies
2. Supporting Learners Online
3. Designing and Evaluating Online and Blended Learning
4. Educational Research
5. Dissertation

The choice of themes was informed by the results of the 2006 Benchmarking of E-learning Exercise, which indicated that there was an evident gap in staff skills to teach effectively in an online and blended environment. It was also informed by feedback from previous iterations of the Applications of Learning Technologies course, that became the programme foundations and also a short staff development course in Online Tutoring. This feedback indicated that colleagues required a flexible programme which they could adapt to their professional context, but which would allow them to develop skills in the following areas:

- 1 Effective use of the VLE
- 2 Various learning technologies
- 3 Multimedia
- 4 Creating and locating learning objects
- 5 Designing of activities
- 6 Using online assessment (summative and formative)
- 7 Using online communication tools
- 8 Using online collaborative tools (e.g. Blogs and Wikis)
- 9 Supporting learners online

These requirements were grouped into three main areas, which formed the first three modules/courses of the programme:

- 1 Applications of Learning Technologies
- 2 Supporting Learners Online
- 3 Designing and Evaluating Online and Blended Learning

As there was also a demand for colleagues to foster research-informed teaching and being able to assess the effects and impact of online and blended learning, we also developed a fourth module in Educational Research, which would give participants from wide ranging disciplines an insight into educational research paradigms, methods and methodologies. This would also enable participants to carry out a small scale empirical research project, which would feed into their dissertation.

From an institutional strategic perspective, the research-focussed module had a secondary aim in encouraging colleagues to apply for Learning Enhancement Opportunities institutional funding, which they could use to enhance their teaching practice and contribute to their professional development.

3.2. Choice of Delivery Model

Whilst the programme is entitled Online and Blended Learning, the programme is delivered entirely online (e.g. by distance learning). This reflects the aims of the programme, which are to:

- 1 Develop an in-depth understanding of the current state of online and blended learning in HE
- 2 Critically evaluate current theory and practices in relation to online and blended learning
- 3 Gain experience working with educational technologies for teaching, supporting and managing learning
- 4 Participate and contribute to the development of a dynamic online learning community
- 5 Identify your changing training and development needs in relation to online and blended learning and plan for their fulfilment
- 6 Design, implement and evaluate a framework for incorporating theory and applying online and blended learning within your professional context.

Online delivery allowed us to offer greater flexibility, where colleagues would not be tied to attending a weekly lecture or regular events. It also gave colleagues the opportunity to experience and engage with online learning to a greater extent than would have been possible using a blended learning approach. The programme design team felt that the inclusion of a blended learning element would not challenge assumptions regarding the possibilities offered by e-learning tools, technologies and methodologies, and would therefore be less beneficial for participants in terms of their professional development and engagement.

In addition to adopting a flexible model of online delivery, the programme team also responded to feedback from previous iterations of Applications of Learning Technologies as a stand-alone module/course, which expressed a need for a more flexible structure – which recognised the difficulties of committing to 300 hours of study on top of teaching and research commitments of our academic staff.

In response to this, the first three modules/courses ('Applications of Learning Technologies', 'Supporting Learners Online' and 'Designing and Evaluating Online and Blended Learning') are available as a combination of short courses. Thus, each module is divided into 5 short courses, each requiring a time commitment of 50 or 100 hours depending on the course. Once a participant has completed all the courses within a suite of short courses, they are awarded the credit for the full module and any award that it confers.

The deployed online delivery structure allows the participants to interact with a variety of key e-learning aspects regarding online collaboration, communication and content delivery. These key themes are addressed through the provision of activities including podcasting, blogs, video conferencing, interactive materials and online assessment. Thus by using technologies within their own study learners may gain an insight into possible utilisations within their own content and transfer the newly acquired skills into their teaching practice, thus addressing one of the key aims of the course.

The short course structure also allows colleagues to take a strategic approach to their own professional development, taking only those courses which they feel will be beneficial to them and facilitate their acquisition of necessary skills and competencies.

3.3. Accreditation

The first module of the programme – 'Applications of Learning Technologies' is accredited with SEDA under the Embedding Learning Technologies award (SEDA 2008). This allows colleagues to get a named award, which they can use as evidence of professional development and expertise both for progression at UEL, and externally.

The first four modules – 'Applications of Learning Technologies', 'Supporting Learners Online', 'Designing and Evaluating Online and Blended Learning' and 'Educational Research' – are also accredited with the HEA (HEA 2008). This allows colleagues to gain Associate status on successful completion of any one module and Fellowship on successful completion of any two modules. HEA Fellowship has been integrated into the UEL Professional Standards Framework, which will shortly inform the internal promotions procedure.

4. Development Process

4.1 Development Team

The development team included the Programme Leader, The E-learning Manager (with responsibility for e-learning staff development), the Director of Learning and Teaching (with responsibility for implementing the institutional professional standards framework), a Learning Designer (a specialist in e- and distance learning), Leaders in Learning and Teaching from each of the UEL Schools and Services and an e-learning consultant (who had responsibility for writing some learning materials). This broad representation ensured

that the strategic needs of the organisation were balanced with the ‘real life’ needs of lecturers and that, while fulfilling the requirements of a masters level programme, the content was authentic enough to enable participants to gain practical skills which they could apply in their teaching.

4.2. Development Approach

The development team was co-ordinated by the UEL Learning Designer, who liaised with the development team to create

- 1 A project brief
- 2 A detailed curriculum design document
- 3 A programme specification
- 4 Module specifications
- 5 Assessment guides
- 6 A summary mapping document showing module learning outcomes and their relationship to programme learning outcomes and the HEA professional standards framework.
- 7 A participant handbook
- 8 Learning materials

The early stages of the project (the development of the curriculum design document, the programme specification and the module specifications) were done on an iterative basis, as creating each document and the subsequent feedback from the development team led to increased insight which led in turn to changes in the design and content of the programme. Whilst this was a time consuming process, it ensured that we were able to react to all feedback and incorporate it into the design of the programme, and ensure that the needs of all colleagues would be met through the development of the programme.

The development process is a cyclic activity and feedback from the module leader, participants and those that support the learners is sought and utilised to develop and improve course content and the methodologies deployed in the delivery and assessment of the course material. Particular attention is paid to the development of an effective online community through identifying instances of potentially successful communication and collaboration opportunities.

4.3. Strengths and Weaknesses

Approaching the design and development of the MA from a strategic perspective has both strengths and weaknesses, which can be summarised as follows:

Strengths:

- Close relationship between organisational needs and content
- Close relationship between identified individual needs and content
- Ability to gain external accreditation
- Complements a professional standards framework which rewards achievement
- Facilitates structured professional development planning
- Permits fast and flexible response to changes in organisational needs

Weaknesses

- Individual needs could change over time and there is no guarantee that institutional needs will change along the same lines or at the same pace
- Could be criticised as restrictive - rewarding certain types of professional development in online and blended learning
- Possibility of the close relationship to institutional needs affecting the marketability of the programme

- Institutional focus may dilute the personal development appeal of the course

By identifying the weaknesses, the programme team were able to develop a strategy which could be implemented to ensure that the programme remained fit for purpose, and continued to operate within the academic framework. These included reviewing the content of the programme on an annual basis and reacting to current and future trends, amending the structure, presentation and support offered and assessment methods in response to student comments and formal module evaluations.

The programme team felt that the external marketability of the programme should be a secondary concern, however, they felt that once on the course, participants from outside the institution should not be disadvantaged in any way. As a result of identifying this issue as a potential weakness of the programme, we revisited the aspects of the course which could be interpreted as being focused on the local institutional context. We ensured that the content of these sections was presented as information, and included activities which asked participants from outside the UEL to find similar information about their own institution and share it with their colleagues, thereby promoting an exchange of ideas between institutions and greater understanding of the variety of approaches and strategies adopted by HEIs. The module feedback form included a question regarding participants' affiliation, thus allowing us to see any correlation between student satisfaction and his/her UEL or external affiliation.

5. Evaluation

Taking a strategic approach to the development of the MA in Online and Blended Learning has been very successful in terms of aligning national and institutional e-learning priorities and individual professional needs of academic staff. While there were some concerns regarding inflexibility and adaptability within a rapidly changing field, the programme team felt that by promoting flexibility and the opportunity to relate ideas, theories and tools to the professional context we were providing participants with unparalleled choice to address their own needs in terms of online and blended learning skills and knowledge development and professional accreditation. Part of this choice is to integrate professional development planning with the institutions vision and framework, as articulated in the institution's professional standards framework, however, this is supported by the programme, as opposed to being a programme requirement.

Achieving alignment between the various professional standards frameworks (HEA and local institution) has been a challenge, particularly in the early stages of the programme, involving intensive outcome mapping, however, the result of the programme and the comments of participants suggest that this was the right decision, and that the opportunities and choices which were made available were the right ones.

6. Future Developments and Project Opportunities

During the development of the project the team has made decisions regarding the content of the programme based on research and thorough literature review, trends and issues in the field (Horizon Report by NMC 2007, 2008), local content (UEL Benchmarking Survey 2006 and Pathfinder 2007), institutional priorities (Pathfinder project, UEL Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy) and input of academic staff. However, during the design and development of the programme, we identified a need for further staff development in a number of areas such as teaching and learning in virtual worlds, Web 2.0 tools and others. The programme team felt that many of these areas were best addressed outside the context of the MA, however, we recognised that online and eassessment was a large topic which would be suitable for inclusion in the MA as an optional module. Including an optional module would also have the additional benefit of giving colleagues the opportunity of gaining a Postgraduate Diploma, without undertaking the module in Educational Research. Informal feedback suggested that this would be welcome, given that colleagues qualified to doctoral level felt that they did not require further research methods training, however they did want to gain further knowledge and skills relating to Online and Blended Learning, and be recognised for it.

Whilst the programme seeks to showcase the key technologies early feedback from practitioners engaged on the first module indicate that they would like the opportunity to investigate the technologies further from both pedagogical and technical aspects. It is felt by the development team that these requests would be better served by tailored staff development sessions apposite to those needs rather than be addressed through the auspices of the programme.

Originally it was envisaged that the programme would primarily be marketed internally however it is evident that there is growing demand for such a programme within Higher Education and most noticeably in the Further Education sector which is witnessing a growth in the provision of Foundation Degrees and the prospect of degree conferring status. Given the development history of the programme it currently has a prescribed disposition towards Higher Education which may have a detrimental effect on the ability to market the programme to other sectors. This is particularly important regarding the Further Education sector which now requires practitioners to undergo 30 hours of personal development in order to achieve and retain Qualified Teaching and Learning status. The desire of many practitioners within Further Education to ensure that this requirement is fulfilled by meaningful activity congruent with their career aspirations represents a prime marketing opportunity for the course.

The MA in Online and Blended Learning can rightly be deemed successful in meeting its key aims as defined by its design parameters. It is effective in addressing the institutional needs and the requirements of academics in relation to flexible access to personal and professional development relating to e-learning. The programme responds to the demands of the sector and organisations such as the Higher Education Academy for comprehensive staff development designed to raise the standard of teaching and thereby improving the quality of the student experience.

Whilst it is right to acknowledge and celebrate this success it is not time to rest upon those laurels. The nature of the Higher Education sector, pace and complexity of technological changes, the needs of academics, raising level of student expectations and the growing potential of other sectors are ever developing and exacting.

Therefore it is imperative that the programme design has incorporated into it sufficient flexibility and responsiveness to meet these fresh challenges. Accordingly, we are currently piloting the programme as a short course delivery which will act as a vehicle for collecting feedback which in turn will feed into the proposed cycle of review and continuous improvement prior to full delivery of the programme in September 2008 (UEL 2008a).

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